

# Balancing interests in a research project through internal ethical engagement

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*In educational design research projects, there are long-term relationships between researcher and participants. Hence, in addition to external ethical engagement, researchers have to engage in internal ethical issues, which became evident when a researcher suggested mathematical content for an intervention. The suggestion was both appealing to and uncomfortable for the teachers, and this ambiguity made power relations between the researcher and the participants visible. In the moment, the researcher made decisions about the content that might not be the best. This situation made visible the importance of internal ethical engagement in advance, for example, by thinking about how we care for our participants and for what and whom we are responsible.*

Interest in practice-based research has increased significantly in recent years. Often researcher's role in practice-based research is discussed in terms of the researcher being an insider or an outsider (Bridges, 2017). Whether the researcher being an insider or an outsider, there are relations between the researcher and the participants that need to be attended to in ethical discussions.

In practice-based research, as well as in other research, the researcher is obliged to follow regulations for research provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017). Following these regulations implies what Floyd and Arthur (2012) call external ethical engagement. However, researchers also have to engage in internal ethical issues (Floyd & Arthur, 2012).

In this paper, an empirical example from an educational design research project is used to emphasize ethical issues concerning the relationship between the researcher and participating teachers. In the project, there is a long-term relationship between the researcher and the participants, and power relations are at play (Bridges, 2017), which makes it important to take situational- as well as relational ethics into consideration (Tracy, 2010).

In the intervention (Sterner, in press), the researcher, Helén (author in this paper), met with some teachers to choose mathematical content. Based on a previous study with the same teachers, Helén suggested either working with the equal sign or patterns and functions. In the conversation, Irma, one of the teachers, expresses curiosity and eagerness to introduce functions in collaboration with the

others, while Clara, another teacher, reveals herself and shows discomfort to introduce functions. In addition, Jonna, a third teacher, says “Functions feel difficult and strange in school year 1”.

Our analysis of the example is that the suggestions from Helén were met by conflicting reactions from the participants. In the group, the idea of introducing functions was both appealing and uncomfortable. In their reactions, the teachers also related to different objects: Irma’s and Jonna’s contributions in the conversation, although they express different opinions, concern functions itself. Clara’s contribution, on the other hand, concerns herself and her insecurity. In the continued project, it was decided to work with functions. |

The above example illustrates the power relations between the researcher and participants, and shed light on the importance of internal ethical engagement. We can see how the researcher’s actions have consequences for participants and their feelings. Irma’s and Jonna’s conflicting ideas, and Clara’s reflection about insecurity were issues Helén as a researcher had to take into consideration in the ongoing process. Hence, in the moment, Helén had to deal with what Tracy (2010) emphasizes as relational ethics.

In the situation, Helén could not make the careful analysis we have done. Instead, she decided to work with functions, despite doubts expressed by the participants, based on what previous research in the area has shown: that functions can contribute to algebraic thinking. Helén made the decision with students’ and teachers’ best in mind. Nevertheless, it is worth considering a question raised by Tracy (2010, p. 847): “are the harms of the practices outweighed by its moral goals?”.

During the session, we would like you to think of the above example and your own research projects with three questions concerning internal ethical engagement in mind: How do we care for our participants? What responsibility do we have? For what and for whom are we responsible?

## References

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